

Politics, Education and Student Voice

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ABSTRACT

Many states are facing unprecedented budget shortfalls, and elected officials are implementing a variety of solutions to the problem. Cuts to education directly affect educators at all levels and will likely affect students as well. Announcement of proposals viewed as harmful to faculty has created a charged atmosphere on college campuses across the country, with some faculty and staff, union members and representatives, and students staging protests and rallies primarily opposing budget cuts to education and elimination of collective bargaining for faculty. However, significant support for these same proposals exists in society in general. This study examines relationships between student perceptions of how these issues are addressed in classrooms, perceptions that professors want to know what students think, beliefs about whether an individual's position reflects the majority, and whether students feel free to express their opinions to their professors. Results extend the utility of the spiral of silence theory beyond hypothetical situations to an authentic context, and serve as a reminder that student voice is not only an essential component of liberal education but may be a useful barometer of a society's attitudes and opinions.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines relationships between politics, student voice, and education within one university with a clan culture. This clan culture is defined as a friendly place to work where people share themselves through various outlets such as web pages with profiles or brown bag luncheons featuring faculty discussing their research, and in which membership claiming devices in official university statements indicate a focus on loyalty and tradition (Smart, 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Faculty-Student Interaction

- Students who perceive that faculty members are approachable, available for outside (informal) interaction and respectful, are more confident in their academic ability and were more motivated (Komaraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010)

Student voice

- "There are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together" Fielding (2004)

Spiral of Silence

- Presumes that conformity is essential to social harmony and that disagreement is discouraged because people communicate based on how others perceive them (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).
- Issues of interest are moral-laden or value-laden

Climate of Opinion

- When individuals perceive that their views place them in a minority position, they will then be less likely to express those views because they fear isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974)

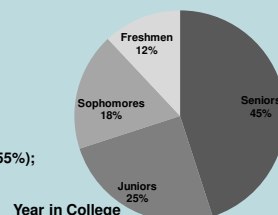
METHOD

INSTRUMENTATION

- Self-report data collected through online questionnaire to a random sample of students
- Qualitative and quantitative: triangulation of method
- Data analyzed with SPSS
- Open-ended responses were content analyzed

PARTICIPANTS

- 154 students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
- 76% women; 24% men
- Sample from a variety of departments including: arts & sciences (55%); business (39%); education & human sciences (5%); and, nursing and health services (1%)



RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

RQ₁ When issues surrounding state budget cuts to education are discussed in classrooms, are both sides of the issues being discussed?

- 46% either "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that both sides of the issues were discussed
- RESPONDENT QUOTE: "[Professors should] teach about issues rather than indoctrinate. Make classrooms feel like a place you can voice your opinions without worrying about being downgraded"

RQ₂ Do students believe that a) their opinions on state budget cuts to education are important; and, b) their opinions on state budget cuts to education are heard by their professors?

- 84% believed their opinion on state budget cuts to education was important
 - RESPONDENT QUOTE: "It's important to me, and so when there were rallies on campus, I felt it was my duty as a citizen and a student with an opinion to express it"
- 54% believed their voice was not heard
 - RESPONDENT QUOTE: "Ask what we think not tell us what to think"

RQ₃ To what extent do the following variables collectively predict students' feeling free to express their opinions to professors on statewide budget cuts to education: a) perception that both sides of the issue were discussed in class; b) belief that one's opinion on the issue reflected the majority of students on campus; and, c) belief that one's professors want to know what one really thinks of proposed cuts to education?

Feeling Free to Express Opinion on Budget Cuts with Professors			
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B		
(Constant)	.914	3.667	.000
25. Overall, when issues surrounding the proposed state budget cuts have been discussed in my classes, both sides have been presented...	.189	2.394	.018
31. My professors want to know what I really think of the proposed state budget cuts.	.297	3.680	.000
40. My position on the proposed state budget cuts reflects the majority student opinion on this campus.	.354	4.620	.000

Three variables accounted for 42% of the variance in feeling free to express opinions to their professors
(F = 34.94, t = 3.67, p < .001.)

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

- Even when external forces are commonly believed by professors and students to threaten education, assuming universal opposition is not only incorrect but threatens students' freedom of expression
- If students believe that their professors are presenting an unbalanced view of issues, other variables related to the antecedents and benefits of such interaction are also likely to suffer; two salient factors include professors' credibility and students' beliefs that their professors respect them
- A lack of understanding exists among the general public about teachers' jobs, pay, and benefits
 - Results show engagement in frank discussion of divisive issues to discern where any potential misunderstanding or misinformation is happening

LIMITATIONS

- Self-report data
- Study limited to one university
- Study limited to one political context

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- UWEC Differential Tuition
- Faculty/Student Research Collaboration Grant
- Department of Communication & Journalism
- UWEC Office of Research and Sponsored Programs